

ing and carefully researched information. With a keen eye for detail, Sarah paints a vivid picture of the scenery, vegetation and wildlife, as well as the history of settlements in the area, such as Balfour and Guildford. In just a few words she brings to life some of the early explorers – Henry Hellyer and James ‘Philosopher’ Smith, for example. The text is enhanced by colour images of animals, plants and fungi contributed by several photographers, including Sarah, and also by Nicholas Sheehy’s monochrome drawings of birds and insects. The main text is followed by details of the 99 CD tracks, a table of fauna sightings, and an index of flora and fauna with the scientific names printed next to the common names. Tracks on the CD are numbered and highlighted throughout the text.

The CD features 89 tracks of high quality recordings of animal sounds—mainly bird-song, but also calls of insects, frogs and the Tasmanian Devil—interspersed with ten of Ron’s innovative musical compositions

based on these sounds. To the untrained ear the music may seem strange at first, but appreciation grows with repeated listening. Six musicians, including Ron, perform the compositions on various instruments. Wilderness areas such as the Tarkine, where, to quote Bob Brown, ‘one is imbued with the awe of being part of nature’s continuum’, are always a source of inspiration, whether for photographers, writers, artists, musicians, botanists, zoologists or anyone who just enjoys the experience of being there. One of my favourite tracks on the CD is the recording of the exquisite ascending call of the Ground Parrot, accompanied by the distant roar of the mighty Southern Ocean. Atmospheric indeed.

This publication should appeal to anyone with an interest in natural history. Needless to say, a visit to the Tarkine is now at the top of my ‘must do’ list.

Virgil Hubregtse

6 Saniky Street
Notting Hill, Victoria 3168

The Gilded Canopy Botanical Ceiling Panels of the Natural History Museum

by Sandra Knapp and Bob Press

Publisher: *Natural History Museum, London, 2005. 168 pages, hardback; colour photographs. ISBN 0565091980. RRP \$49.95*

This attractive little book documents the decorative botanical panels that adorn the ceilings of the Central Hall, Landing and North Hall of Natural History Museum, London.

The founding Director, Richard Owen, conceived the Museum as being a ‘cathedral to nature’ where learning and discovery about the natural world were paramount and where national pride in the British Empire could be celebrated. His vision is reflected in the Museum’s neo-Romanesque design by architect Alfred Waterhouse.

Waterhouse envisaged a grand central hall, or ‘nave’, where Owen’s directive for an ‘Index Museum’, a comprehensive introduction to the order of nature, could be realised. Smaller, more specialised



galleries radiated from the hall. A grand staircase led from the hall to the smaller North Hall where the natural history of the British Isles was to be displayed. The gilded decorative ceilings featuring plants from around the world were to unify the separate halls while introducing visitors to the marvels of the plant kingdom.

Knapp and Press were unable to find any of Waterhouse's original drawings on which the ceilings decorations are based, so it is not clear how the initial selection of plants was made. As the panels are reminiscent of herbarium specimens, it is possible that the Museum's Keeper of Botany, William Carruthers, was involved. It is believed that the final selection of plants was made by the artist James Lea of the Manchester firm Best and Lea, and were probably painted in situ from scaffolding. Despite budget constraints, the gilded ceiling decorations are quite extraordinary.

There are 12 plants depicted and named in the Central Hall, each consisting of six panels combining to make one major picture. Generally they are European in origin or are introduced plants of economic benefit, for example the Tasmanian Blue Gum *Eucalyptus globulus*, which was being cultivated in Southern Spain for the production of eucalyptus oil. The Showy Banksia *Banksia speciosa* seems a surprising inclusion on these criteria but, as the authors point out, it is perhaps a tribute to Sir Joseph Banks who bequeathed to the Museum his herbarium from his various voyages of discovery.

The apex of the ceiling is decorated by simpler, more stylised depictions of plants, almost like photographic negatives.

Possibly inspired by Nathaniel Wallich's *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores*, published between 1830-32, these plants are not named, and despite painstaking research the authors were not able to conclusively identify all of them. By contrast, the plants on the ceiling panels above the staircase at the southern end of the Great Hall are more accurately depicted and have their scientific names. All had some influence on human civilisation or trade and most were those upon which Britain built up trade, empire and industrial might, e.g. tobacco, cotton, coffee. Knapp and Press provide some interesting notes and stories on the introduction and exploitation of some of these species, including sugar cane and opium poppy.

The 18 plants from throughout the British Isles portrayed in the Northern Hall are also botanically accurate and shown with their scientific names. They represent a variety of habitats, and again the authors provide interesting notes on a selection of them.

The book does not provide a detailed analysis of the style of the artwork and techniques, and frustratingly there is only one passing reference to Victorian interior design. However, it does provide the first comprehensive listing of the plants so beautifully represented in the ceiling panels of the Natural History Museum, and may be of great interest to the botanically inclined visitor.

Eve Almond
Museum Victoria
Carlton Gardens
Melbourne
Victoria 3000

One Hundred Years Ago

EXHIBITION OF WILD FLOWERS

Following the custom of late years the October meeting of the Field Naturalists' Club consisted chiefly of an exhibition of wild flowers. These had been sent by members and friends from many distant parts of the State, such as Casterton, Dimboola, Echuca, Benalla, Sale, Castlemaine, Bendigo, &c, and, thanks to the cool weather, arrived in very good condition, so that the display was one of the best yet held. An additional feature was a fine series of flowers of Australian plants blooming in the Melbourne Botanic Gardens, showing that, contrary to the prevailing idea, many of our indigenous flowers are capable of cultivation.

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